

Back Cast

By Ron Wilson



A tree stand that doesn't groan when you shift your weight, is comfortable and looks at home in the confusion of limbs and trunk, is a thing of beauty. It's hard not to appreciate a good one.

I started thinking about tree stands after reading the bowhunting piece written by Curt Wells for this magazine. He wrote that in the early days of bowhunting in North Dakota, tree stands were illegal. This, to someone who came into bowhunting when tree stands were already the rage, is hard to imagine.

While pursuing game on the ground is a big part of bowhunting – think stalking bedded mule deer or hunting pronghorn from a ground blind – climbing into a tree stand to mind a trail worn to dirt in places by heart-shaped hooves, defines hunting for whitetails for some people.

If you've spent time in a tree stand, you understand the rush of knowing that something is coming. Few things stir you like the simple snap of a twig or crunch, crunch, crunch of dead leaves. Cold toes warm, and the baggage of work and home you've lugged 20 feet up a tree, vanish because an animal – and not a darn squirrel this time – is simply walking around.

Portable tree stands are the standard today and the most practical for the serious hunter adjusting his or her hunting spots depending on wind, time of year, weather, and other factors. Many are camouflaged, can be carried like a backpack, feature everything from shooting rests to footrests to padded seats and carpeted platforms.

I own a portable tree stand and it works just fine. I couldn't tell you the name of the company that made the thing, which gives you an idea of how long I've had it. Even if I wanted to look for a name, it's likely long been covered – again and again – with spray paint or Duct tape. Sometimes it can be a

sonofagun to get locked into place right where I want it, but it's safe and beats sitting on the ground in most cases.

This stand, and others like it, has no character, however, at least not like the ones built with wood and other materials you'd never think to see up a tree. It's these permanent stands that intrigue me. They're few and far between in the places I hunt, but you'll find one, or at least the remnants, now and again.

I've climbed into a handful, but not during deer season, just to satisfy my curiosity. I guess I do this to see what the hunter sees, to figure out why he built where he did. Is it because deer pass by here often enough to keep him interested or because it is the only tree with possibilities in country with so few trees? The answer, most times, is never that obvious.

Once while hunting sharptails, I found a stand that couldn't have been more than a couple years old in a multi-row tree belt. The wood wasn't that weathered, and the heads of some of the nails still had a shine. I leaned my shotgun against a tree; climbed in, thinking it was a pretty good place to eat the small lunch I was packing. Inside the stand was a five-gallon bucket that passed for the hunter's seat, and underneath was a paperback novel in a Ziploc bag. I don't remember the name of the book or its author, but do remember envying the reader/hunter for employing two of my favorite pastimes into a day's hunt.

Another stand I visited more than once had notches carved into the two-by-four railing, each signifying, I'm guessing, the number of deer shot from this vantage point. Sort of a poor man's hunting journal, without all the superfluous details about temperature, wind direction, those sorts of things. While it's difficult to read anything from notches in wood, I didn't take the markings as bragging, but simple reminders of a hunter's success.

The stand isn't there anymore. On a return visit, I couldn't find the thing, not even a bent nail that once kept the steps in place. I wasn't turned around in the small woodlot, having followed the same deer trail as always to a clearing where you'd first notice the horizontal structure hammered into a vertical world.

You had to admire the tree stand owner's leave-no-trace departure in country where when something breaks down or is no longer needed, that's where it remains. Who knows why the hunter dismantled and moved on. Maybe I had misread the notches in the two-by-four altogether. Instead of successes, perhaps they were marks of a bored hunter counting his stay until a deer finally wandered by.